

**Before the House International Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations
And Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
“The Internet in China: A Tool for Freedom or Suppression?”
The Testimony of Libby Liu
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to testify today on the important topic of China’s Internet censorship. I would like to take this opportunity to brief you on how Radio Free Asia is fulfilling its congressionally-mandated mission to act as a surrogate for indigenous free media in China, how it has been aggressively developing new ways to expand its audience in China in this Internet age, and why its mission today is, if anything, even more important than when our station began broadcasting a decade ago.

Radio Free Asia first went on the air in September 1996. Since then the Internet has witnessed explosive growth in China, claiming more than 110 million users by official Chinese numbers. Radio Free Asia has, in the short span of 10 years, established itself as an objective source of information for the people of China, many of whom rely upon us daily for news of the latest events and trends in their own country.

Radio Free Asia has earned the trust of its Chinese listeners and has established a reputation for being a credible source and effective disseminator of information. When domestic Chinese media fail to inform, Radio Free Asia is there to fill in the gap. In the words of a Sichuan listener who telephoned RFA Mandarin service’s “Listener Hotline”: “Radio Free Asia is a beacon of hope for the Chinese people.” This has become particularly vital in spreading lightning-fast news concerning cyber-activism and cyber-censorship.

I. RFA is Aggressively Covering the News of Cyber-Censorship

Radio Free Asia’s recent coverage of Chinese cyber-censorship and its aftershocks includes the following:

1. In September 2005, Radio Free Asia was first to report the closure of the Yunnan Forum, an online discussion site that had reported the controversy over a recall campaign by villagers in Taishi in Guangdong province of their elected village chief. Before the Web closing, Yunnan received a warning from the government that no news about Taishi was to be posted on this site. News about Taishi was referred to as “harmful information.”
2. In October 2005, RFA reported that two Web sites, Ehoron and Monhgal, in Inner Mongolia, were closed. These sites served primarily as a discussion platform for Mongolian students. When the site managers promised not to post any information on Mongolian separatism on the site, they were allowed to reopen in December 2005.
3. Beginning in June 2005 and continuing throughout January 2006, RFA has been reporting on the highly popular Yulun Net Web site and its blogs’ periodic closures. The Web master, Lee

Xinde, told RFA that the most recently closed blog, Dahe, had more than 100,000 page views since September and was the first to report on the alleged bribery of the vice mayor of Jining in Shanxi province. He also told RFA that he is instructed to close down specific blogs by the authorities.

4. On December 6, 2005, Radio Free Asia was first to report the news that protesters were being shot by paramilitary police in Dongzhou village, near the city of Shanwei, in Guangdong province. Villagers there had been protesting the construction of a power plant on land that had been expropriated by local officials. According to witnesses interviewed by Radio Free Asia, more than a dozen villagers were killed, though the Chinese government to this day insists that only three persons died as a result of the crackdown. Radio Free Asia was able to break the news of these shootings because an eyewitness had called one of our bureaus, desperately asking for help. His exact words were: "Please tell the world what they are doing to us!" Despite a Chinese state media blackout of these events, RFA.org was able to provide continuous coverage and reach its audience through small proxy Web servers.

5. Also in December 2005, RFA.org published a video account of events in Taishi village in southern China, where villagers had been petitioning since July for the recall of their elected village chief over charges of corruption. Within days, a man turned up in a local café providing vivid details of the footage. "How did you get to see that video?" asked one of the patrons. "I access the RFA Web site via proxy servers," the man answered. He invited a group to his home where, behind closed doors, they all gathered in front of his computer screen to watch the video. On that day, many people in China battling government oppression knew they were not alone

6. On January 2, 2006, RFA reported that Shenzhen in Guangdong province was the first city to use a new Web police warning system in China. When Web users log onto the Internet in Shenzhen and visit certain discussion forums, they see a pop-up figure of two police officers. This figure leads to a warning page that instructs Internet users to comply with the law. RFA reported that users felt intimidated by the pop-up and feared that it acted as a surveillance tool.

7. And just a few weeks ago, on January 24th, Radio Free Asia was first to confirm the government's suspension of *Bing Dian* ("Freezing Point"), a popular and influential weekly supplement to *China Youth Daily*. In our interview, Li Datong, the supplement's chief editor, told us that simultaneously with the paper's closure, he was notified that his personal blog had been removed from a popular Web site, on orders "from higher-up." Radio Free Asia's initial report on this crackdown on political expression was soon picked up by more than 30 major media outlets worldwide.

These stories, and many others reported by RFA, demonstrate that despite dramatic improvements in their economy, the Chinese people often pay a heavy price for exchanging ideas. According to Reporters without Borders, China is the world's leading jailer of journalists and cyber-dissidents. Despite the fact that its city dwellers can now sample pizza from Pizza Hut and savor lattes from Starbucks, China remains what former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky has called a "fear society." As Sharansky explains in [The Case for Democracy](#), "If a person can walk into the middle of the town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, or physical harm, then that person is living in a free society, not a fear society. If

a person cannot do so, that person is living in a fear society.” By Sharansky’s standard, or by any reasonable standard, China today is a “fear society.”

Radio Free Asia has helped ensure a free flow of information into this “fear society” so that its people can learn what is happening in their country--including, importantly, what it is that their government does not want them to know.

Beyond the benefits to the Chinese people of having a source of objective news and a forum for communicating freely with one another, the potential benefits to the United States are considerable as well. The Rising China – both economic and military – has brought home to us the importance of providing this closed society accurate, unbiased news and information beyond what its leaders allows its people to have.

Authoritarian governments are heavy handed in controlling access to information. More complete information, and greater exposure to competing political viewpoints, help ensure that populations in closed societies are more likely to approach the outside world, including the United States, with an open mind.

Even where citizens of foreign countries are managing to obtain greater access to news from third parties, these sources are far from being substitutes for the work of entities such as Radio Free Asia. On this point, the Chinese government certainly seems to agree. Why else are they so aggressively trying to block access by the Chinese people to our Web site? And why do they devote so much effort and money to jamming our radio broadcasts?

II. RFA is Aggressively Expanding Its Audience in the Age of the Internet

RFA’s Mandarin, Cantonese, Uyghur, and Tibetan Web sites have a unique connection to the people who live under Chinese censorship. They match rigorous reporting with lively interactive exchanges with their readers via email and message boards. Through cyberspace, as much as through the broadcast airwaves, RFA bears witness to the hope and despair of those who seek to exercise their right to free expression in China.

Audience research figures from Intermedia, an independent research firm, show there may be as many as 175 million adults in China accessing the Internet on at least a weekly basis, nearly as many as in Japan and South Korea put together. But the Web carries its own dangers. When Chinese readers go online, they do so under surveillance and often at great risk to themselves and their families. Rarely do they get a full picture; many sites are blacked out whether the users know it or not. The pages they visit are recorded, the content filtered, and their browsing patterns closely scrutinized. And the situation is not about to improve, as China continues to invest in the most advanced technologies for blocking unwanted material from blogs, emails, and Web sites.

The scope of China’s Internet surveillance is daunting. Reliable figures are scarce, but reports speak of tens of thousands of Web police patrolling cyberspace, with 86 journalists or Internet users in Chinese jails. Beijing has enormous resources directed towards Internet censorship.

Conventional wisdom has long held that the open nature of the World Wide Web and its free, accessible brew of cultures would “bring democracy to China.” Today that view looks optimistic indeed. The question is not whether the Internet is going to change China, but rather how much China is going to change the Internet.

RFA bears the brunt of Beijing’s censorship. If RFA is stymied, its Chinese readers are deprived of news that is immediately relevant to their daily lives. They lose a chance for the crucial input that can help them make informed decisions for themselves and their families and form opinions based on accurate and balanced information.

As a news organization, RFA operates in a highly unusual environment and maintains a unique relationship with its Web users. RFA must not only distribute its news, but must help its readers to outsmart the censors. We know we are catering to people who might have to read the pages using proxy servers or via encrypted transmission services.

We use all available avenues to reach out to new readers and strive to stay at the cutting edge of technological innovation. Our radio broadcasts educate our target audience on how to use proxy servers and other gateways. On the Web, we offer live streaming of our broadcast shows. We are constantly looking for ways to evade the Chinese censors. In October we started offering our news programs via podcast to multiply the number of distribution channels and make the content ever more portable.

The Internet anti-censorship program of the Broadcasting Board of Governors provides support for our efforts to break through the Chinese blockage of our Internet content. The BBG's Office of Information Systems and Technology works with industry and government consultant experts to find ways to keep information flowing to China through Internet portals. The emails are distributed by BBG to users in China, which in turn allow those users the ability to access RFA, VOA or other blocked sites on the worldwide web through the proxy sites identified in the emails. The BBG continues to monitor and utilize the latest technology to get through the filtering mechanisms of the Chinese Government.

By all evidence RFA Web users are not easily deterred. They share their fears openly about being observed and even threatened by the Chinese government. One of our Tibetan readers wrote on a message board last month how he drew a menacing reaction when he posted “10 famous sayings for 2005 by Chinese leaders.” “When I checked back,” he said, “I received a threat from what I believe is a Chinese user. This showed how little China has changed over the last 50 years.” But others wouldn’t let him get discouraged. “Don’t be intimidated,” answered one of his message board buddies. “We are practicing free speech. Whoever wants to intimidate those who speak out will be condemned and lose the moral high ground.”

RFA is also partnering with a courageous and growing online community of technical experts inside and outside China who help us get our newsletters out to the people who need them. With their help, we are creating a widening network of human proxies, so informal that it has no visible shape but is very much alive. Message boards, emails, blogs and instant messages pick up where the government has cut us off. Friends and family based in third countries post our articles on their own Web sites and then pass on the Web address. RFA news travels fast and well by fax,

letters, phone, and word of mouth. We know that when it matters most, our information gets to its destination.

The hope of the Internet for societies such as China's is that it will help enable people to communicate and hear dissenting views through a medium that is more anonymous, and hence leaves them less vulnerable to government retaliation. In the case of China, democracy activists, rights defenders, and others with a degree of computer literacy are increasingly using the Internet to exchange ideas despite the fact that in exercising their digital rights they risk incurring the wrath of the country's cyber-police. This is no doubt one reason for the recent highly publicized demand by Chinese authorities that foreign technology companies agree to limit their search engine functionality as a condition for operating within China. The Internet in general and online forums in particular are critical to the growth of rights consciousness and a freer civil society in China.

In addition to reporting on issues such as the jailing of cyber-dissidents and the closures of Web sites, RFA.org has increased substantially its coverage of specifically Internet-related and Internet-driven topics. Our Mandarin service news scripts are sent to more than two million e-mail accounts a day across China. Our February 1 report on US internet technology companies and China apparently struck a nerve with our audience, as it drew almost three times the number of page views that we witness on a normal day. The posting of the "Wild Pigeon" fable on our Uyghur, Mandarin and English web pages brought to thousands of people inside and outside the Uyghur Autonomous Region the allegory for which the poet and the publisher were imprisoned. The RFA Tibetan site has become a discussion forum for 164 topics of debate among Tibetans over the last 11 months and is now a real-time conduit for breaking news.

We are witnessing a profound change in China. That change is occurring not only in the economic and technological sectors, but even more importantly in the psychology of the Chinese people. Thanks in part to the flow of information that the Internet has facilitated, a growing number of socially aware Chinese have become loyal listeners of foreign broadcasters. At the same time, there has been an upsurge in rights consciousness on the part of the general public. As a result, people are less willing to live in obedience, and some are taking to the streets to voice their objections to issues ranging from forced evictions to corruption to environmental pollution. The Chinese Ministry of Public Security reports 87,000 public disturbances across the country last year, up from 74,000 the year before.

Radio Free Asia takes great pride in its high-quality work, and in the fact that we provide our listeners across China, and those in the other East Asian nations to which we broadcast with objective and balanced information. As such, we serve as an example of a free press for our listeners.

In addition to bringing news and information to the Chinese people that they cannot otherwise access, Radio Free Asia, through news analysis and commentaries, aims to promote Internet freedom by impressing upon its audience that human rights include digital rights, and that freedom of expression in real time – in the actual town hall or in the virtual town square – is itself a fundamental right, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that Radio Free Asia is ably and eloquently fulfilling its mission—providing journalism of the highest standard to East Asian populations whose governments aim to restrict their access to full, balanced, and objective news coverage. RFA, further, is taking maximum advantage of Web technology to deliver our reporting by every available means, including RSS feeds and podcasting. Every day is a new race for technological advantage at speeds too fast to handicap—and with some notable victories.

Nearly a year ago, thanks in part to pressure from this Congress, Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer was released from jail in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and exiled from China. On March 17, 2005, she was reunited with her husband in the United States. RFA recorded the moment in words and photos that we quickly posted on our Uyghur- and English-language Web pages. Barely 24 hours later, the children Ms. Kadeer had left behind in Urumqi had seen RFA's online coverage and excitedly told their siblings in the United States: "We saw our parents kiss!" In a Chinese autonomous region with uniquely stringent Internet controls, where police keep close tabs on who speaks to whom, where any Uyghur jubilation prompts suspicion or worse, this simple digital photo of Rebiya Kadeer and her husband locked in a tender embrace, published online from half a world away, constituted a joyful triumph.